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Is the Level of Teacher Burnout More Significant Among Elementary Special Education Teachers or Elementary General Education Teachers?

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Teacher Stress and Burnout

Although there is no universal definition of burnout according to Dworkin (1986) and Farber (1991), Freudenberger was the first person to define the term. It was originally used in reference to health care workers who were affected both physically and psychologically by this condition. Freudenberger described burnout as a state of exhaustion from working too intensely without regard to one's own needs (Friedman, 1991). Maslach (1982) defined burnout as a reaction to a chronic condition resulting from everyday job stress. Burnout of workers is characterized by feelings of failure and exhaustion because of the excessive demands on energy, personal resources, and spiritual strength. Cherniss (1980) and Lazdrus (1995) defined burnout as a reaction to the chronic difficulty involved in controlling one's stress that results in psychological distancing from work (Burke & Greenglass, 1996). For the purpose of this study, burnout is defined as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that may occur because of job-related stress (Maslach, Jackson, Leiter, 1996).

In addition to health care workers, burnout is now associated with professionals who work in other human service fields, such as teaching (Byrne, 1994). The teaching profession has undergone profound changes because of minimum competency examinations,

issues of accountability, deteriorating working conditions, violence, and the lack of respect for educators (Harris, 1995). According to a survey conducted for Metropolitan Life Insurance Company (Harris, 1995), the status of the public school teacher has declined. Teachers once had well-respected positions in the community, but now they are individuals with low self-esteem. The public has lost faith in public education and teachers. According to the NEA's Director of Instruction and Professional Development, "Americans value education, but they have never valued teachers" (Hudson & Meagher, 1983, p. 4). Increases in class size and class mix, a preponderance of students from nontraditional families, lack of student motivation, discipline problems, and the mainstreaming of special needs students in general education classes have contributed to greater demands on teachers in the classroom. As a result of such major changes and demands, teachers are reported to be experiencing higher levels of stress leading to the possibility of burnout (Hudson & Meagher, 1983).

It has been estimated that some symptoms of burnout affect more than 40% of all teachers. The educational, administrative, and financial implications of this problem can be significant for a school system (Friedman, 1991). Although burnout can result from teacher stress, it is not known if the burnout levels are higher among special education teachers or general education teachers. Stress in teaching marks the onset of the burnout process. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine if the level of teacher burnout was more significant among elementary special education teachers or elementary general education teachers.

For the purpose of this study, elementary special education teachers are defined as teachers who teach pre-school and primary students who have learning difficulties and/or who have impairment in their physical, sensory, emotional, or intellectual abilities. These teachers may also teach students with speech and language problems. Elementary general education teachers are responsible for the education of children between the ages of four and eleven years old. They plan and conduct an education program that consolidates academic skills and promotes the physical, emotional, intellectual, and social development of their students.

Review of Literature

Stress has been called one of the most critical issues in teaching. According to several surveys and studies, a significant number of teachers have experienced the physical and mental symptoms of stress. As a consequence of these feelings, an increasing number of teachers have forsaken their careers (Boe, 1993; McIntyre, 1983; Terry, 1997). Stress that is experienced by teachers comes from many sources and manifests itself in many ways. Stress causes feelings of exhaustion, frustration, guilt, irritation, and feelings of being overwhelmed (Carter, 1994).

Among the factors reported to cause stress in education were student discipline, time pressures, oversized classes, excessive paperwork, and poor university preparation (Hudson & Meagher, 1983; McIntyre, 1983; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). Other common stressors named in the research were student violence, school vandalism, lack of administrative support, limited parental involvement, and inadequate resources and salaries. One report indicated that stress had multiple causes, not all of which were people- or job-related (Hudson & Meagher, 1983).

There are two central determinants of burnout: the organizational perspective and the personality perspective. The organizational perspective refers to the organizational variables that explain the burnout process. The major issues that have been found to cause stress within the organization are role-conflict and role ambiguity (Burke & Greenglass, 1996). Role conflict occurs when two pressures are present at the same time, making it difficult for a person to comply with each of them. Role ambiguity occurs when there is an obscurity as to workers' "obligations, rights, objectives, status, and /or accountability" (Byrne, 1994, p. 648).

Farber (1977, 1991) stated that there are two personality factors that may show how people in the same work environment experience different levels of stress (Byrne, 1994). The personality perspective refers to individuals' receptiveness to burnout and their personality factors (Friedman, 1991). The two aspects of the personality perspective are locus of control and self-esteem (Byrne, 1994).

Rotter (1996) found that internal and external controls were individual differences within people. Internal control refers to the condition of people who feel they have control over outcomes in a situation. External control refers to the condition of people who feel they do not have control over events and their outcomes. Cedoline (1982) and Farber (1991) concluded that burnout is more prevalent in people who exhibit external locus of control (Byrne, 1994).

Farber (1991) and Hogan & Hogan (1982), among other researchers, have stated that burnout is affected by self-esteem. According to Hogan & Hogan (1982), many people feel stress when they perceive that they are receiving social rejection. People who experience low self-esteem become more apt to feel stress because of this perception (Byrne, 1994).

Special Education Teacher Burnout

A review of the literature suggests that burnout among special education teachers is higher than that of the general education population (Wisniewski & Gargialo, 1997). It is generally believed that special education teachers experience a disproportionate amount of stress because of their daily contact with and responsibility for students with special needs and the problems associated with these students (Hudson & Meagher, 1983). The research on special education teachers' stress and burnout focuses on the elements specifically associated with their students (physical, cognitive, emotional, adaptive, and social problems) and factors inherent from the state and federal mandates (IEP meetings, due process paperwork, parental involvement, and accountability) (Frank & McKenzie, 1993).

The review of literature indicates that a host of factors interact to contribute to burnout in special education teachers. Researchers have categorized these factors in various ways. For example, Billingsley (1993) referred to external factors (e.g., societal, economic, or institutional variables), employment factors (e.g., teacher qualifications, training, and working conditions), and personal factors (e.g., family needs, demographic variables, and individual interests/personality) that affect teacher burnout. Similarly, Brownell and Smith

(1992) described five contributing factors: historical influences (referring to the quality of teacher preparation), teacher characteristics, environmental influences of the workplace, federal/state/district policy factors, and external influences (family and cognitive/affective variables). Other factors reported by teachers include (a) restrictions caused by time limitations, (b) frustration caused by poor attitudes and lack of support on the part of the administration, (c) the feeling that one's personal priorities are being shortchanged because of professional demands, (d) the lack of recognition for extra work and good teaching, (e) the unmet need for enhanced status and respect on one's job, (f) disappointment caused by poorly motivated students, and (g) the perception that one's class and caseload is too large (McIntyre, 1983; Hudson & Meagher, 1983; Terry, 1997).

General Education Teacher Burnout

Teaching has been labeled a high stress occupation (Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). Billingsley and Cross (1992) suggested that the enjoyment teachers derive from their job and the energy and ingenuity they bring to their classrooms are diminished by job-related stress. Job stress negatively and substantially affects the classroom environment, the teaching-learning process, and the attainment of educational goals and objectives (Hudson & Meagher, 1983; McIntyre, 1983; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997).

Starman and Miller (1992) found that work overload and role conflict were major sources of stress for beginning teachers (cited in Hewitt, 1993). In their review of literature dealing with beginning teachers' stress, researchers found the following to be the major concerns reported: (a) ability to maintain discipline, (b) student-teacher relationships, (c) teacher grasp and knowledge of subject matter, (d) lack of resources, and (e) relations with other faculty, administrators, and parents (Hewitt, 1993; Hudson & Meagher, 1983; McIntyre, 1983). Beginning teachers also reported that they were unable to use teaching techniques taught in their education courses, and that they felt unprepared for the real world of today's classroom (Fraser, 1991).

With respect to experienced teachers, Billingsley (1995) reported that the chief sources of stress were related to (a) time demands, (b) difficulties with students, (c) crowded classes, (d) low salaries, and (e) lack of educational resources. General elementary education teachers repeatedly cited certain factors as primary stressors. Some of these included student discipline, rapport with administrators, lack of participation in decision-making, and negative school environment (McIntyre, 1983; Terry, 1997).

Variables Affecting Teacher Burnout

Research has shown that teachers' backgrounds and demographic variables affect burnout. Findings have shown that different groups have different scores on the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Burke & Greenglass, 1996). Scores were higher for men in the areas of depersonalization and emotional exhaustion (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). Schwab & Iwanicki (1982) and Greenglass & Burke (1990 & 1996) also found higher rates of depersonalization in men than in women. Studies indicated that single teachers reported greater frequency of emotional exhaustion and intense feeling of depersonalization than married ones (McIntyre, 1983).

Research suggests that work-related variables tend to be better predictors of job satisfaction than demographic variables are. Stressful working conditions and overtime may promote burnout (Billingsley & Cross, 1992). Examples of work-related variables include excessive paperwork, increasing caseloads, low salaries, lack of administrative support, collegial isolation, role conflict or ambiguity, the need to challenge student behaviors, and lack of visible student progress (Brownell & Smith, 1992).

The literature depicts teaching as a stressful job that may contribute to low morale, mental and health problems, job dissatisfaction, burnout, and increasing teacher attrition. Teaching appears to be more stressful today than in former times.

Design of Study

To date, research regarding teacher stress and burnout is limited. Thus, further study is necessary to document its incidence in and impact upon both elementary special education teachers and elementary general education teachers. Research efforts have failed to clarify the factors which teachers address as stressful.

As part of this study, frequency of teacher stress and burnout was investigated to identify and analyze the variables associated with stress and burnout for elementary special education teachers and elementary general education teachers. The educators' responses were compared to determine if there was a difference in the degree of burnout according to the three sub-scales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory. Considering the effect that stress and burnout have on teacher health, job satisfaction, absenteeism, and attrition, this study was warranted by data it could provide on the variables associated with stress and burnout.

Sampling Method

A nonrandom sampling technique was used in the study. The sample was representative of the population in the region and cannot be generalized to other schools or school districts. The elementary general education teachers were selected from two elementary schools in the middle region of a state in the Southeast, schools which will be combined into one elementary school in the year 2000. The elementary special education teachers were pulled from five elementary schools, the Program for Exceptional Children's Pre-School, and the Psychoeducational Center. Teachers of additional special education classes and programs were included to make the sample of teachers proportional.

In the school district under study, the total number of elementary special education students was 561 (17%). The total number of students in the Program for Exceptional Children was

139 (15%). The total number of elementary general education students in the area under study was 3,276. The total number of elementary general education students in the two elementary schools in the region was 959.

Measurement Devices

A three-part self-report questionnaire was constructed to assess teacher burnout. Part I contained twelve questions concerning teachers' demographic characteristics (e.g., age, sex, marital status) and occupational responsibilities. The teachers were asked to estimate the percentage of time devoted to instructional activities, professional development, noninstructional tasks, and contact with parents. Part II of the survey assessed the incidence of twelve stress-related physical symptoms. Respondents were instructed to rate the symptoms according to a five-point Likert-type scale: (1) never a problem, (2) seldom a problem, (3) sometimes a problem, (4) often a problem, and (5) a continual problem. The symptoms were high blood pressure, respiratory problems, headaches, ulcers, insomnia, grinding teeth, excessive fatigue, appetite problems, skin disorders, irritability, backaches, and laryngitis.

The third part of the survey was the Maslach Burnout Inventory—Educators Survey (Maslach et al., 1996). The Maslach Burnout Inventory is recognized as the leading measurement of burnout and was developed by Christina Maslach, Susan E. Jackson, and Michael P. Leiter. The Educators Survey is a twenty-two-item questionnaire used to identify and assess burnout levels of individuals who work in school settings.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory statements, which describe feelings or attitudes, were designed to measure the extent of burnout symptoms. The teachers rated each statement based on frequency. The frequency scale for each of the twenty-two items ranged from 1 ("a few times a year or less") to 6 ("every day"). The teachers were instructed to circle the number that best described themselves or, if the feeling described in the statement was absent, to circle zero ("never").

The twenty-two statements were further divided into three sub-scales: Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment. Each sub-scale had two dimensions: frequency and intensity. However, only frequency was used in this study. The frequency with which the teachers experienced feelings in each sub-scale was evaluated using a six-point format.

The Emotional Exhaustion subscale consisted of nine items that described feelings of being overextended and exhausted by one's work. When these feelings become chronic, educators find they can no longer give of themselves to students as they once did. Symptoms of Emotional Exhaustion include increased irritability, frustration, feelings of anger, and dislike of students.

Educators who no longer have positive feelings about their students are experiencing the second component of teacher burnout, Depersonalization. This subscale incorporated five items describing impersonal attitudes and insensitive responses toward students. Among the many ways educators can display indifferent, negative attitudes toward their students are using derogatory labels, exhibiting cold or distant attitudes, physically distancing themselves from students, and tuning out students through psychological withdrawal.

The eight components of the third subscale, Personal Accomplishments, are particularly crucial for educators. Most educators enter the profession to help students learn and grow. When educators no longer feel that they are contributing to students' development, they are vulnerable to feelings of decreased personal accomplishment or lack of competence or self-worth. The job provides few other rewarding areas to which they can attach their accomplishments, and it is difficult for educators to relinquish their dedication to teaching.

Procedure

Two groups were identified within the schools in the middle region of a state in the Southeast—elementary special education teachers and elementary general education teachers. Surveys were distributed to each of the elementary general education teachers at their respective schools during a faculty meeting and to the special

education teachers during a meeting at the special education office. Each survey contained a letter of explanation, a consent form, and a three-part questionnaire. There were a total of 80 appropriately completed questionnaires returned. The overall percent of returns was 78%.

Analysis

The total raw scores for each teacher on the frequency dimension of the three subscales were used to generate group means. According to the manual, the three sub-scales are divided by frequency into areas of high, moderate, and low; and each of the sub-scales is scored separately. High scores on the Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization and low scores on Personal Accomplishment reflect a high degree of burnout.

T-tests were applied to determine differences between the two groups according to the three measurements of the assessment. The responses were tabulated to determine the percentages from the surveys.

Findings

Part I of the survey consisted of demographic characteristics and occupational responsibilities. The largest percentage of time devoted to occupational responsibilities for all surveyed teachers was in the area of instructional activities. The least amount of time was spent in the area of professional development.

Part II of the survey asked the teachers to assess the incidence of twelve stress-related physical symptoms associated with teacher burnout on a Likert scale from one "never a problem" to five a "continual problem." Symptoms were considered a problem if respondents answered sometimes (3), often (4), or a continual problem (5) on a Likert scale.

The highest percentages of physical symptoms among elementary special education teachers included headaches (16%), excessive fatigue (15%), and irritability (15%). The highest percentages of physical symptoms among elementary general

education teachers included excessive fatigue (16%), irritability (13%), and appetite loss or increase (12%). Among elementary special education teachers, the least reported symptom was ulcers (1%). Among elementary general education teachers, the least reported symptom was respiratory problems (3%).

Part III of the survey incorporated the Maslach Burnout Inventory Scale. An independent t-test was applied to determine if there was a difference in depersonalization between elementary special education teachers and elementary general education teachers. Comparing the two groups, $t=-2.75$, $p<05$. The elementary special education teachers had an $M=3.67$. Elementary general education teachers had an $M=6.58$. Therefore, the elementary general education teachers showed a higher degree of burnout in the area of depersonalization than the elementary special education teachers as measured on the Maslach Burnout Inventory.

The independent t-test to determine if there was a difference in emotional exhaustion between elementary special education teachers and elementary general education teachers yielded a $t=3.72$, $p<.001$. The $M=17.9$ for elementary special education teachers and $M=26.4$ for elementary general education teachers showed that the mean for elementary general education teachers was significantly higher. This finding indicated a higher degree of emotional exhaustion for the elementary general education teachers.

Based on the results from the Personal Achievement section of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, there was not a difference between scores of the elementary special education teachers and elementary general education teachers. The $t=0.167$ E-01, $p>05$. The $M=39.0$ was the same for both the elementary special education teachers and the elementary general education teachers.

The development of depersonalization appears to be related to the experience of emotional exhaustion, and so these two aspects of burnout were correlated (Maslach, et al., 1996). The correlation coefficient yielded an $R=0.9227$. This result indicated a significantly high correlation between emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

When individual Maslach Burnout Inventory items were totaled for evaluation, findings indicated that elementary general

education teachers reported a higher level of emotional exhaustion than elementary special education teachers. The elementary general education teachers had a score of 15. This indicated that they were less likely to relate positively to their students than teachers who scored higher. Out of the total number of respondents, only one elementary general education teacher showed a high degree of burnout across all three sub-scales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to compare the levels of teacher burnout among elementary special education teachers and elementary general education teachers. The results of this study implied significant differences in the degree of burnout experienced by the two groups of teachers. Elementary general education teachers scored higher than elementary special education teachers and thus demonstrated a higher degree of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. There was no significant difference in the area of personal accomplishment among these two groups. Contrary to expectations, elementary special education teachers experienced fewer and weaker symptoms of burnout.

One possible explanation for this finding may be differences in personality types between the two groups. Stress is contingent not only on environment as cited in Friedman (1991), but also on the reaction of the teacher to stress, as cited in Byrne (1994). Readers could surmise that, as a group, special educators might be less susceptible to the effects of stress because of common personality traits that initially attracted them to a career in special education.

Another possible explanation for this finding may be found in state-mandated enrollment ceilings which restrict the number of students in special education classrooms. Also, the presence of paraprofessionals in special education classrooms further lowers the pupil-teacher ratios. According to Zabel and Zabel (1991), large class size is reflected in high scores for emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and in low scores for personal accomplishment (McIntyre, 1983). According to the literature, elementary general

education teachers may also experience higher levels of stress and burnout from a lack of student discipline, a lack of rapport with administration, lack of participation in decision making, and a negative school environment (McIntyre, 1993; Terry, 1997).

Other workload pressures that may account for the higher level of burnout among elementary general education teachers come from the multiplicity of tasks to be performed within given time restraints. In the literature review, Billingsley (1995) reported time demands as a chief source of stress for teachers. In addition, a feeling of lack of personal accomplishment often occurs, according to Farber (1991) and Hogan and Hogan (1982) who report that burnout is affected by self-esteem.

This study indicates a difference in the level of stress leading to burnout between elementary special education teachers and elementary general education teachers. Further studies, however, could investigate intervention strategies for individual schools and/or school districts. Investigation of successful teachers would also offer possible data for further studies. In addition, future studies should address or control for the effects of variables such as the number of teachers surveyed and the time of year the survey is administered. Finally, few studies have focused on the effect teacher burnout has on students' learning. The burnout of teachers may have consequences for the educational performance of students (Maslach et al., 1996).

Conclusion

This examination of teacher burnout among elementary special education teachers and elementary general education teachers revealed some interesting findings. The review of the literature suggested that burnout among special education teachers was higher than that of the general education population (Wisniewski & Gargialo, 1997). Contrary to the review of literature, this study showed that general education teachers experience more stress than special education teachers.

To avoid the high cost of inadequate educational systems in the future, Americans must begin to place a higher priority on

education and thereby the personal well-being and professional training of teachers. A teacher who is stressed or burned out disrupts the learning process. Teacher stress and burnout are significant issues worthy of further investigation.

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